An Interview with Joseph Nechvatal

Joseph Nechvatal was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1951. He studied painting at Southern Illinois University, Cornell and Columbia. Nechvatal's powerful and disturbing images both critique the world of technology and draw on its powers. His work has appeared widely in the United States and Europe, including the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney in New York City, and the Documenta 8 exhibition in Kassel, Germany.

Hagley: What do you think is the relationship between your writing and your painting?

Nechvatal: My writing is a kind of allusive explanation. I usually think of my work first and the words second. But that's a tough question, because the two really are distinct, unrelated experiences.

Hagley: A lot of artists don't write about their work. Why do you?

Nechvatal: I think it's important for artists to try to write about their work. It helps you to think about your work, develop it, and find out what you do and don't want to do. Also, it's an artistic expression. When I write I try to not to be too analytical, or too descriptive, but rather allusive.

Hagley: Just like your painting.

Nechvatal: Exactly. There is a dense, cryptic quality that carries over into a lot of what I do. It's a contestation against simplicity, and propaganda and advertising, everything that tells you what to see and how to see it. That's why I'm interested in mannerism. I'm attracted to that kind of excess. It's not clear, it's not simple, it's up to you to participate in the work as a viewer. You get swept into the grandeur of it all, and then give it a freer interpretation. I find something like a simple photographic image which we think we comprehend: boring. We move rather easily and briskly from it and off to the next thing. I attempt to slow the media down. Slow the process down. My other interest, of course, has to do with the subconscious, how to gain more access to the subconscious.

Smith: By writing?

Nechvatal: No, by addressing somewhat nebulous situations.

Smith: Do you see that as historically coming out of surrealism?

Nechvatal: Well, I certainly understand the similarities. However, I wouldn't think that my work came directly from surrealism. At least it wasn't conscious on my part. I was attempting to get beyond late minimalism and conceptual art. However, even though my work grew out of a reaction against minimalism and to a certain extent conceptualism, when I look back I realize that I actually adopted a lot of conceptualist preconceptions in the way the idea becomes the machine that makes the art. I'm still very attracted to ideas like that. Surrealism? Well, I just wrote an article for *Artforum* on this really obscure British artist named A.O. Spare who was working around the turn of the century. He was a precursor to surrealism, doing trance drawings. The spirits of dead artists would come into him, take over his body and do these drawings. In the article I tried to intertwine his tale with my own observations and theories, particularly concerning what's going on now with the electronic media.

Smith: That's almost like automatic writing. He got the images from dead artists?

Nechvatal: That's what he said.

Smith: Identifiable dead?

Nechvatal: Dürer, Blake, Michelangelo. He was a whack, but I thought it was really interesting that he was willing to give up his individual identity to take on this kind of collective identity. He's the father of chaos magic, something I'm interested in. Spare was both an artist and a magician. He studied with Aleister Crowley, but then they had a fight, and they broke off their relationship.

Smith: The unofficial slogan for the Kassel Documenta 8 show, in which you played a major part, was "the return to the modernist project." This seems to have become a catch phrase in Europe now. If I understand what they are saying, that implies the death of post-modernism—the death of minimalism and all of the high post-modern forms—and the attempt to reinvent modernism. And I'd assume that surrealism would be included as a major aspect of modernism. Do you think that you may have been unconsciously doing something like that, moving from the post-modern back to the modern?

Nechvatal: No, I certainly wouldn't want to do that. I'm for taking post-modernism farther. I don't think it's gone nearly far enough, in that there

are still a lot of holdover modernist tenets that are really screwing up the situation. There's a nostalgia for them. An article I recently wrote on cynicism got into that subject. I realized that cynicism comes out of the nostalgia for some of these modernist tenets that we think we've cut ourselves free from. But we haven't really. So there's a cynical attitude that says, "Oh, modernism has failed and has its broken promises." That's what I see as the source of a lot of the current cynicism, particularly in the New York group of artists called simulationists. They have created a kind of neo-abstraction which pretends it's not abstraction at all, but a schematic representation. But no, I wouldn't say that I was unconsciously trying to revive modernism. If anything, I'm going in the opposite direction. I'm really interested in taking post-modernism a lot farther. It has just started and it needs to go on for a while.

Smith: You're unlike most post-modernists in that you seem to have a certain projectuality to your art.

Nechvatal: I'm really interested in Georges Bataille, his writings and theories on ecstasy. He's one of my main sources of inspiration. I'm involved with Dionysian ideas.

Smith: Your use of the computer and various images of technology seems to compare in some ways with the futurist fascination for machines at the beginning of the century.

Nechvatal: No, because they were so gung ho. My position on technology is one of ambivalence. That's why I try to bring out the chaotic and the Dionysian in technology. The idea that technology—especially in this country and everywhere in Europe and Japan now—is the answer, that it'll solve all the problems, that it'll never let us down, that it's wonderful, that we should never question it, that too much is never enough, all these attitudes are classical idealist attitudes that I find really repugnant. That's why I'm attracted to splintered and degenerate imagery. At the same time, I fuse that attitude with the use of technology, so that the form and content are unified.

Smith: There does seem to be a kind of ambivalence toward technology in your work, but sometimes you get so far into it you seem to be embracing it. In one of your essays, you say, "Today information moves fast, while meaning travels very slowly. The era of information makes less not more sense. But when the meaning of things is lost, when you no longer believe in structures and power, you find yourself in a spiritual state like in Zen, the satori experience, or in any mystical state where the world makes no sense whatever and a more profound and universal meaning emerges." Do you have to embrace technology before you can pass beyond it?

Nechvatal: You have to push through it, go beyond it. That's the way I see it. You can't stop and try to go around it, because it's all around us. It's our reality, it's our world right now. But the point is not to just stand there in awe and be blown over by it, but just push through it.

Smith: Wouldn't you say that Ernst in his Dada stage liked machines and hated them at the same time? Didn't he have that same kind of ambivalence?

Nechvatal: Yeah, I can see that.

Smith: It's a very peculiar state of mind. People tend to oversimplify the futurists by saying they simply loved machines and so forth, but they had a fairly complex notion of things.

Nechvatal: Yes, they did. I'm particularly interested in the futurist sound projects and radio projects, the whole idea of noise as music.

Smith: Rusolo?

Nechvatal: That is more up my alley than "War is beautiful."

Smith: But almost everybody of every political stripe, from Marinetti to Mayakovsky, loved World War I. They thought it was going to wreck the old order.

Nechvatal: I don't think you can wreck the old order. I don't think there are ruptures like that. Rather it's a constant regurgitation of history. We bubble up to decadent points, where something can then rise up on top of that. But I don't think it happens in a swift break. It's more like an accumulative swirl.

Smith: Decadent. So that's why you like mannerists?

Nechvatal: Yeah, I've studied the *fin de siècle* period, in France particularly, and I see a lot of parallels between the end of modernism and the end of nineteenth century romanticism and symbolism. The end of their century is just like the *fin de siècle* we're moving into. The whole notion of abuse and degeneration vis à vis proliferation, I find this especially interesting.

That's one of the things I attribute to decadent art.

Smith: Proliferation in what sense?

Nechvatal: Of imagery, of the proliferation of all kinds that goes to the point of degeneration. And that brings a lot of things in society into this network. I am speaking in terms of nuclear capability, population, and pollution. As things proliferate they become too big and begin to break down. There's a dangerous element there, but I find it fascinating.

Smith: You talk about epic imagery in contemporary history in one of your essays. Does the epic always have to be ironic? There always seems to be something ironic in your epic imagery.

Nechvatal: Is there? I'm trying to get away from that. I was more ironic when I wrote that piece and I was using a lot of heavy cliché images from the media, particularly from magazines, in an ironic way. Over the last two years I've tried to separate myself from that way of thinking and move beyond the ironic and the paradoxical, because it's not satisfying enough just to make ironic comments on society. Now I want to try to offer a positive alternative. That's where I made a break with my nihilistic and ironic attitude, which was fueled by politics and particularly by nuclear weapons, which, by the way, I found very interesting to study. Now I've broken through to the other side; now I'm into ecstasy and identity rupture as very positive things, and the losing of a personal sense of identity as a positive thing, a liberating thing. All of this, again, under the influence of Bataille. I also found Baudrillard's book, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, to be helpful to me in this respect. So I've tried to break away from making ironic and paradoxical statements.

Smith: That brings me back to the post-modern again, because irony seems to be one of the main forces of post-modernism.

Nechvatal: Up to now.

Smith: So does that mean you're breaking away from post-modernism or taking it somewhere else?

Nechvatal: I hope I'm just taking it somewhere else. I don't think you can call post-modernism an "ism" yet. It's just a toddler. I think it would be a mistake to canonize it, with certain artists that represented it and so on. It's much too soon to do that. We're in a period where modernism, late modernism, and the beginning of post-modernism are overlapping.

They're all happening simultaneously; it's a moment in flux. A lot of the eighties were a rehash of modernism, utilizing modernist materials and attitudes towards art. So I think we're in that transitional phase between late modernism and what I'd call post-modernism. I don't know what they're talking about in Europe, saying it's over.

Smith: They seem to want to put a bullet in its head.

Nechvatal: How can you go back to modernism?

Smith: You reinvent it somehow. I don't think they want to return to historical modernism. They like its idea of projectuality. You just said you were sick of irony. The European New Modern seems to share this disgust for irony; they see it as a kind of paralysis.

Nechvatal: Well, if you equate post-modernism and irony, then you'd want to kill both. But I don't make that equation.

Smith: Antonio Porta, in his *Caliban 3* interview, says that post-modernism was a corrective phase of modernism. He claims that it's all part of the same package. Now there's going to be a new stage, since the so-called "monsters" of modernism have been corrected.

Nechvatal: There are so many fundamental tenets of modernism that have already been questioned and/or corrected. It's almost like a new animal now.

Smith: Wouldn't the supporters of the New Modern concede that this next stage would appear to be a new animal? It wouldn't look like the old one. Maybe they're just trying to say there was modernism, then post-modernism, and now there has to be something else, whatever that's going to be.

Nechvatal: I think that's not a bad way of looking at it, because I think there should be something else. But you've got to come up with the right tag for it.

Smith: Maybe the name is really more important than the theory.

Nechvatal: It is important, because it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. When you talk about a movement, and name it, it's easier to make it happen. It's more concrete.

Smith: I was going to ask you how you felt you fit in with the New Modern

in Europe, but obviously you don't feel like you do.

Nechvatal: Maybe I don't know exactly what they're talking about, unless it's a rejection of irony and cynicism. But I wouldn't term that Modern, or New Modern.

Smith: One of the main themes of the Documenta 8 show was the necessity of decommercializing art. In one of your essays you say "Our society does not have an idea of art that is shared by all." Is that the kind of thing you're talking about there, the predominance of elitist and "bought" kinds of art?

Nechvatal: The rest of that sentence goes on to say that there is a kind of low culture, TV culture, and then there is this real high-priced elitist art that nobody else understands. That indicated to me that I should reintroduce representational images, references to the media, a visual language that ordinary people were used to, something they could identify with. I wanted to get them involved at some level, and then of course do things—I don't stop there—on top of that. I think that was what I was talking about. I was trying to close that gap between the elitist non-representational art industry and the popular media culture which the majority of the people understand and respond to.

Smith: You seem to be interested in non-saleable art, through videos and things.

Nechvatal: I am, but I don't take a complete vocational stance on art. I think art should be a vocation, but it's also necessary to live in this world. My position on the problem is to do it all: make paintings, do posters, do performances, videos, work in public space, do collaborations. I just don't think it's an either/or situation. I support trying to do it all. But that doesn't mean I feel that it's any one artist's responsibility to do it all.

Smith: Another intriguing assertion was when you said "I'm an agitator in the information war." Does that mean that you're a guerilla? Of course, guerilla is not quite the same as an agitator.

Nechvatal: No, it's not. Yeah, I know I said that. It's a posture. I was talking about using the cliché media imagery. In my earlier works, the all-gray works, I was really degenerating those images, mixing extremely contradictory images together, overlapping them, using a lot of synthesis of representational photographically derived public images. So in that way it was a kind of agitation. That's what I meant.

Smith: You were subverting the images?

Nechvatal: Yeah.

Hagley: Are you embarrassed by that quotation now?

Nechvatal: It does sound a little pretentious, doesn't it?

Smith: The urban guerilla out there degenerating the sacred images?

Nechvatal: That showed up somewhere in a magazine and they put it in bold type. It sort of embarrassed me.

Smith: It's the kind of line that's easy to excerpt.

Hagley: What do they call those?

Nechvatal: Oh yeah, "sound bites." That's one of those things that just came up in an interview.

Smith: So you just lay a line on them and it keeps coming back at you for another ten years?

Nechvatal: It never seems to go away.

Smith: Another thing you were talking about is that art hasn't caught up to video games. Was that a posture too?

Nechvatal: Well, yeah. That was a line from my first essay. That's what I felt at the time. I don't know now. Video games are sort of passé, aren't they?

Hagley: You must be evolving pretty quickly. Your first essay, what was that, four years ago?

Nechvatal: No, farther back than that. It was '82, I think.

Smith: But you are evolving pretty fast, I think, just from the images I've seen.

Nechvatal: That's what somebody told me yesterday.

Smith: Moving as fast as the information.

Nechvatal: Running behind with a shovel.

PLETHORA by Joseph Nechvatal, 1988
Acrylic on canvas (90 x 138 in.)

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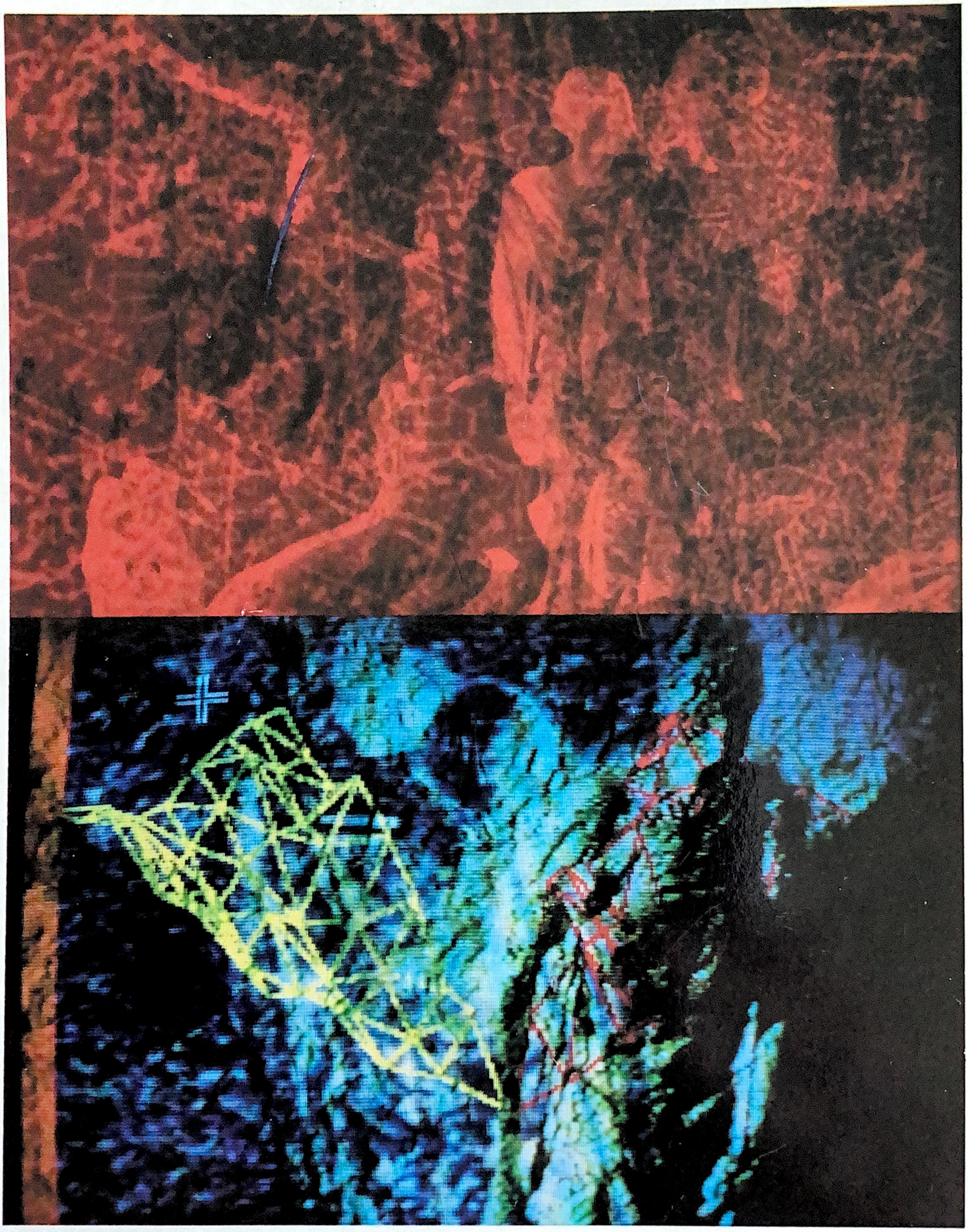

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